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ABSTRACT

Approaches that schools can use to create a high-quality, professional, working community are provided in this journal issue. The report uses a case study to illustrate the process. A review of research reveals at least five major dimensions of the professional learning community: supportive and shared leadership, collective learning and application of learning, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practices. In the school analyzed for this report, data were collected to reveal how the professional learning-community's characteristics were expressed and how the school staff evolved into a professional community of learners. The data were gathered through personal interviews of teachers, present and past principals, parents, an instructional guide, a central-office staff person, and a consulting professor. The report provides a description of the school; its history and development; the components of the professional learning community at the school; aspects of supportive and shared leadership; facets of collective learning and the application of learning; shared values and vision in the school; evidence of supportive conditions; and examples of shared personal practice, such as when teachers visit classrooms to learn from each other. (RJM)

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Issues . . . about Change

Creating a Professional Learning Community: Cottonwood Creek School*

Much of the current literature on school reform extols the importance of school staffs working collegially to increase successful results for students. In the previous Issues paper, "Professional Learning Communities: What Are They and Why Are They Important?" (Hord, 1997b), the defining characteristics of school staffs operating as a collaborative community of professional learners were described. In addition, and of obvious importance, the gains for staff and students when staffs engage as communities of inquiry and improvement were articulated. Note that both terms — professional learning community, and community of inquiry and improvement — are used interchangeably in this paper, as both terms are found in the literature.

Not included in the literature and the paper noted above, however, were strategies or approaches whereby school staffs might develop into such collegial organizations. Staff of the Strategies for Increasing School Success Program (SISS) at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) have undertaken efforts to find, study, and report real-life examples of school staffs that have been transformed into these communities.

Several years ago an account of a school that re-invented itself, adopting a new, high-quality professional working form, was reported in an *Issues* paper, "Schools as Learning Communities" (Boyd & Hord, 1994). The discovery of this school spurred SEDL staff to undertake its current efforts to learn more through exploration of the literature (Hord, 1997a) and through studies of schools operating as "mature" communities of reflection and inquiry. Finding such schools has been a formidable task, for as Linda Darling-Hammond (1996) reports, and our experience supports, they are few and far between.

We have, however, been fortunate in our region to find and study several schools in which the staff operates in this way, and Cottonwood Creek School is one of them. The opportunity to study this school and its development into a learning community of professionals has been instructive. From this research study we have gleaned important information about strategies and factors that contribute to developing and transforming a school staff into a tightly functioning collegial unit. We thank the school staff for this vital opportunity to learn about creating structures that can significantly contribute to a school's effectiveness and subsequently to student results.

Background

As noted above, the study of Cottonwood Creek School is intended to provide more knowledge and understanding about how a school professional staff becomes a community of learners. A basic feature of professional learning communities is the consistent collaboration among the staff. A review of the current research base reveals at least five major dimensions of the professional learning community: supportive and shared leadership, collective learning and application of learning, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. These attributes are present to various degrees in schools and are implemented in unique ways by different staffs. But the literature agrees that they are the defining characteristics of a professional learning community.

What is not so clear in the literature is how these characteristics are developed among the professionals of a school staff. Studies

*The names of the school, university, and curriculum program are pseudonyms.

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currently being conducted by SISS staff in schools such as Cottonwood Creek School are shedding light on this question.

Data were collected for the research study of Cottonwood Creek School in order to discover how the professional learning community characteristics were expressed in this particular school and how the school staff evolved into a professional community of learners. The data were gathered through personal interviews conducted by SISS staff with 30 members of the Cottonwood Creek School staff, the current principal, and the previous principal (who served the school for five years). In addition, an interview was conducted with the previous instructional guide who served in this role to support teachers' effective practice. Three parents, a central office staff person, and a professor from a nearby university who has been involved with the school for the past decade were also interviewed. All but three of the interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. This story of Cottonwood Creek School is a report of the case study research conducted by SISS researchers.

Cottonwood Creek School Description

Cottonwood Creek School is housed in a building that was constructed in 1923. Over the years it has been well maintained and modernized, yet it retains its original identity and charm. The campus now includes a number of portable buildings, as well as some additional permanent structures, such as a gymnasium. The school is located just minutes away from the central business district of a large city. As one approaches the campus, businesses, industries, warehouses, and freeways are much more evident than homes.

Approximately 500 students are enrolled in Cottonwood Creek School, which includes pre-kindergarten through grade 5 classes. The teaching faculty comprises 36 people. Also on staff are a principal, an assistant principal, an instructional guide (as noted above, a person who serves in a full-time instructional support role), and twelve aides.

School History and Development

From the comments of the school staff, the history of Cottonwood Creek School as a professional learning community began about ten years ago. A significant factor in this decade-long story is the association of the school with Hilltop University (HU). In 1987, following some key state-level decisions regarding teacher education, HU secured some grant money and asked Cottonwood Creek School to collaborate in planning and executing a high-quality teacher development program. After deliberation, the staff accepted the invitation to work with HU, a decision that led to numerous meetings between HU and the school staff, with grant monies used to release teachers for the meetings.

The state had also announced that extra funding would be available to 80 schools in the state to work toward educational excellence. A group of teachers at Cottonwood Creek School worked diligently and entered the school in the competition, and Cottonwood Creek was selected as one of the 80 schools, thus gaining visibility and recognition.

In the summer of 1988 the district assigned to Cottonwood Creek a new principal. This principal was not supportive of the plans under way. Within three years (spring 1991) serious conflicts had developed, and in the summer of that year the district assigned another new principal.

Professional Learning Community: The Components at Cottonwood Creek

In this section we report factors and events (gleaned from the research study) that encouraged and supported Cottonwood Creek School's progress toward becoming a professional learning community. Initially, the school's relationship with HU contributed to teachers' feelings of efficacy, and laid the groundwork for the staff to rally around the work of implementing a new curriculum. It was during these years of curriculum implementation that the components of the professional learning community at Cottonwood Creek School were established or refined.

Supportive and Shared Leadership

One of the characteristics of professional learning communities, reported in the educational literature, focuses on shared power and decision making. In 1987, the partnership

with HU provided teachers the opportunity to develop leadership and decision making skills. "We were going to meetings at HU to design a teacher education program where we were making decisions that would impact our school's program and our students." The teachers felt empowered by this, realizing that the students at HU who were doing internships in Cottonwood's classrooms would also be affected by their decisions.

A representative from each grade level in Cottonwood made up the HU Forum. These representatives met with HU and assumed responsibility for sharing plans back at the campus and forwarding ideas to HU at the next Forum meeting. These teachers (established in each school earlier by the district), acted as the vehicle for communication and decision making across the entire school staff. During this early period, the leadership at HU was given credit for supporting the Forum and its way of working with not only the university but also for the methods the Forum used for communicating and sharing decisions with the entire school staff. Subsequently the district began to look more closely at shared decision making at the campus level and instituted the instructional leadership team, training staff from across the district in the knowledge and skills deemed necessary for serving on such a team in each school. This team, clearly articulated by district policy, is composed of the principal as chairperson; a minimum of eight employees — elected campus-based teachers, non-teaching professional, paraprofessional, classified employee, and a district level non-teaching professional; and a minimum of eight non-employees identified through a drawing — two each of parents, community residents, students, and business representatives.

Thus several factors supported the sharing of leadership and decision making at Cottonwood Creek School. First, in 1987 the school's principal encouraged innovation and change and applauded the school's liaison with HU. Second, the district created the teacher and leadership team decision-making structures on campuses. Third, HU provided the opportunity and support whereby Cottonwood Creek staff grew in their confidence to make decisions. HU's support was viewed by staff as key in enabling the Forum to hold everyone and everything together during the 1988-91 period when dissension between a new principal, who had not been part of the original agreements with HU, and the staff and community developed. Shared leadership and decision making were further reinforced by the subsequent principal, brought on board in 1991.

The new principal quickly observed that the staff was troubled. "I have to hear them and relate to their concerns." Therefore, she opened lines of communication and established a voluntary meeting set at a regularly scheduled time and place where staff could come to express issues or problems in an open way (called a charette). Because parents and community members were concerned and needed to be heard, she also initiated a steering committee of people who represented the parents, HU, teachers, administrators, and district support staff.

Decisions were not actually made at charette or in the steering committee, but these structures became initial steps in the development of the decision-making process. Teachers reported that at Cottonwood Creek School a clearly defined decision-making structure has evolved through staff suggestions and staff trial and error. This structure invites everyone on staff to express concerns, and it results in decisions made by teacher representatives. Almost all of the interview participants were familiar with and articulated this structure, which is based on the principles of democratic participation and teacher voice.

This ladder of decision making was used, for example, as a means for determining the focus of staff development for the school year. Suggestions were made in grade-level meetings and priorities determined. The grade-level teacher representative then carried these priorities to the leadership team, where a recommendation was shaped. Subsequently, the entire faculty was convened to discuss and decide on the staff development program, with the staff's voice carried "upward" on the ladder by the established system. The process culminated in a schoolwide meeting to make the final decision.

As charette was being introduced at the campus, a particularly significant development occurred relative to the school's relationship with HU. A foundation especially interested in

The New Curriculum (TNC) approached the university with money for a school that would implement this curriculum. The opportunity was offered to Cottonwood Creek, and the staff studied the offer thoroughly. The staff was already experiencing some discontent with the school's curriculum and with students' progress. The principal charged the staff with sole responsibility for making the decision but stipulated that the decision had to be supported by 100 percent of the faculty. After much consideration, the staff decided to participate.

Supportive and shared leadership develops as the school's formal administrative leader — the principal — accepts a collegial relationship with teachers, shares power and decision making, and promotes and nurtures leadership development among the staff. The principal initiated such a relationship with the teachers by establishing charette, encouraging the staff to be candid in their comments at charette, and listening to their concerns. By "hearing them" and respecting their issues, she began the process of trust building with the staff. In tandem, she gave them the opportunity to make a major decision, to adopt The New Curriculum, thus proving to them that she was sharing power and authority — heady stuff for any staff.

Collective Learning and Application of Learning

Another characteristic of professional learning communities that is reported in the research literature is the staff's selection of a topic for study. They then study the topic together and determine collectively how to apply their new learning. At all levels of the school organization, professionals in the school work collaboratively and continually to learn together, and apply their learning for the benefit of all students.

After the Cottonwood staff decided to implement the new curriculum, collaboration among the faculty increased dramatically, for several reasons. First, since no one was familiar with the curriculum, everyone needed to learn about it and master the new material. Second, the curriculum was organized sequentially, which required teachers to link their work with what was being taught at other grade levels. Third, teachers were expected to develop units and activities based on the TNC outline, so working together on the design of instructional units was important.

As the faculty began to work with the curriculum, they found it productive to develop and maintain close working relationships within and across grade levels. "If TNC is going to work, we have to come together," teachers assessed. They felt they could not effectively use the curriculum without working closely with each other. At this time HU decided to fund the instructional guide position. "There needs to be an internal person to serve as the liaison across the grade levels," the university leadership maintained.

The first person to serve in the role was very knowledgeable about curriculum and began working with teachers to plan and develop units for the grade levels. In a week-long session before school began in the fall, the entire staff met in the cafeteria, referring to TNC, reviewing their textbooks, looking at the state's key competencies and skills elements in each academic area at each grade level. As a way to get an overview of what TNC would look like across a year of instruction, they mapped out the entire year on large sheets of butcher paper spread around the cafeteria. Getting it on paper, and marking those items to which they were already giving attention, brought understanding of how things would flow from the old to the new.

Teachers on any faculty could have taken a new program, such as TNC, and worked individually to implement it, at whatever level of quality they could achieve. The Cottonwood Creek staff, however, chose to take a collective learning approach. In this scenario, teachers would meet at that initial time in the cafeteria, then subsequently in grade levels, and finally with increasing frequency with the entire faculty to learn about various topics.

With the help of the instructional guide and with the encouragement of the principal, the teachers would use their own newly acquired knowledge to develop additional units of study for the students. In subsequent once-a-month sessions, the staff met to share and compare notes and plan for using additional information that they accessed — for example, about the Roman Empire, a unit they were developing in their classrooms. These discussions and brainstorming sessions were punctuated by

teachers' sharing ideas and suggestions of ways to "flesh out" and implement the TNC outline. A major purpose was to work in tandem with each other to provide a coherent program, coordinated at all grade levels. As one staff person reported, "The beauty of this school is there are so many talented people here who learned to work together."

The resulting development of a high-quality curriculum and the development of the school as a learning community of professionals can be attributed in large measure to the school's administrative leadership. The instructional guide worked directly with teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge, and the principal worked actively to bring the staff together as a unit to support collaborative learning and work for TNC. "But," the teachers noted, "they were not prescriptive about it."

During this period the professionals at Cottonwood Creek gained considerable momentum toward becoming a mature professional learning community. The combination of the challenging opportunity provided by TNC, the assistance of the instructional guide, and the principal's effectiveness at bringing the staff together and insisting that they continue to work on the curriculum together succeeded. They established an environment in which the faculty could learn with each other and could work together as a unit. The principal also maintained the support and encouragement that kept faculty working together

Shared Values and Vision

According to the research, a school's vision evolves from the values of the staff and leads to binding norms of behavior that the staff supports. The vision is used as a guidepost in making decisions about teaching and learning in the school. "At the beginning of our work with TNC, we had to write campus plans and we developed our own vision." Every morning the principal would share the vision statement — everyone knew it and could recite it. The children were "docents" (teachers) for visitors who came to the school. They would greet visitors, by saying, "Welcome to our school of the future, where learners [and then repeat the vision] . . . " One staff person reported, "We all believed in our vision because we all had something to do with developing it."

A fundamental characteristic of the vision in communities of professional learners is an unwavering focus on student learning. There is little question that individual teachers at Cottonwood have a selfless attitude about serving kids. Their vision for the school and for themselves is a vision that focuses on children and children's success.

Currently, the teachers' experiences in the school, rather than any particular vision-developing exercise or activity, serve as the basis for their vision. They cannot remember when they did not feel as they do, nor can they remember the precise words of the vision statement created several years ago. Teachers commented, "Our staff wants students to excel and be competitive with others in the nation. We want our students to have sufficient academic skills and background so that they will be able to do what they want to in life."

Supportive Conditions

One aspect of support includes the *physical* elements: the size of the school, the proximity of the staff to each other, well-developed communication structures, a time and place reserved for meeting together to reflect and critique work. The Cottonwood Creek staff were fortunate to have a complete week before school started in the fall to plan. HU paid a stipend to the teachers for the week, and in this uninterrupted quality time they were able to work productively across all grade levels on developing the curriculum. During the school year, the periods for five electives — music, art, library, physical education and counseling — were used to schedule students in two back-to-back periods, giving teachers ninety-minute periods to work together across the grade levels.

A second aspect of support involves *personal* and professional characteristics. Among these are the kind of respect and trust among colleagues that promotes collegial relationships, a willingness to accept feedback and to work to establish norms of continuous critical inquiry and improvement, and the development of positive and caring relationships among students, teachers, and administrators.

A key to supporting and developing the staff as a learning community is sharing information. A research question about communication structures elicited the response from many

teachers that the decision-making structures and the meetings of various groups are primary means of communication. Most reported that the minutes of each of the formalized meetings are printed and distributed to all teachers. Therefore, even if they do not attend a particular meeting, teachers have access to what happened there. In addition, each morning the principal makes announcements over the public address system, some intended for teachers and others for students. The administrators also communicate through notes put into teachers' boxes.

In response to the question about communication with parents, teachers reported that there is a full-time parent coordinator, who organizes many parent contacts and is bringing parents into the learning community. Parent-teacher conferences are conducted, and individual teachers contact parents in a variety of ways, from class newsletters to home visits. Once or twice a year all parents and children are invited to an evening meal and some kind of educational program. One such event was a meeting at the city's art museum, located near the school. More than 500 persons attended. Such efforts encourage communication and relationship building among and between all of the school's constituents.

In addition to communication structures, other supports contributed to staff collaboration and to the development of a professional learning community at Cottonwood Creek School. A grant to the school paid for library books and materials that supported the staff as they worked together on TNC. The state selected the school as noteworthy and awarded it a small grant. This success brought the staff together and helped to confirm their feelings of efficacy and worthiness. An intern program directed by HU provided instructional support for classroom teachers, giving them additional released time for working together. In addition, HU and the grant funds made staff development available that was related to TNC and other topics of interest. Teachers collectively attended conferences and professional meetings as part of the staff development. In the interview commentary from the teachers for the research study, however, none of these factors was as prominent as The New Curriculum and the school's leadership.

Shared Personal Practice

Teachers visit each other's classrooms to learn from each other and to provide useful feedback. Such open and trusting practice contributes to individual and community improvement. In an environment of this kind teachers can share both their successes and their failures and are comfortable in debate, disagreement, and discussion.

Louis and Kruse (1995) label the practice of teachers' visiting each other's classrooms to learn from each other and give feedback to each other "de-privatization of practice." Research has indicated that such activities contribute to a learning community of professionals in important ways. At the same time, though, visiting and observation between classrooms is typically limited, even in highly functioning learning communities. Such is the case at Cottonwood Creek School. Time is a problem in all schools, and at Cottonwood Creek, though some visitation occurs, it usually consists of short or casual observations or conversations with little feedback. Teachers generally said that if they have a question, they will run into another classroom and ask. Several teachers reported that they go into other teachers' classrooms and "they come into mine" and that sometimes they exchange feedback with each other.

One respondent's report indicated that, during the initial implementation of TNC, teachers visited each other's classrooms to learn more about specific TNC units. "I would go to visit another teacher to learn more about how she was teaching Shakespeare. After observing, then we would discuss what she did. I would report observations and she would provide more explanation." Visiting each other apparently originated with the teachers but was supported and encouraged by the principal. Another motivation was the role that teachers played as mentors for their HU interns (fifth year masters degree students) or student teachers (senior level undergraduates who were placed in their classrooms). "We had to be sharp and stay ahead, so that we could give the best development for our student teachers. We wanted them to walk out with the best education [for teaching] possible. Besides, they

were teaching our students, and that was always firmly in front of us — the level of quality provided for our children."

The principal developed various structures designed to enable faculty to share. One forum was the optional monthly "concern" meeting (charette), which provided an opportunity for open discussions of issues or concern to the teachers. Decision-making bodies that met on a regular basis were established. Another focus was activities that fostered cooperation and collaboration among the faculty. Grade levels held open house for other grade levels to exchange information about what was going on and to give staff first hand observation of other classrooms. Individual teachers were asked to share with the faculty exciting things that were happening in their classrooms. The principal frequently visited in classrooms, kept up with what teachers were doing, praised them for good work, and shared their practice with other staff. At the same time it was clear that expectations for their work were high. This principal fully supported TNC and insisted that the faculty work together to be certain to use The New Curriculum well and to achieve compliance with state and testing standards.

A Collage of Collective Action at Cottonwood

The professionals at Cottonwood Creek School believe it is a great school. They are unconditionally dedicated to their children, they have a strong faculty, and they remain pleased with and committed to The New Curriculum. It is important to note the gains in student achievement that occurred from 1991 (the year that The New Curriculum was adopted by the Cottonwood Creek School and the development of the professional learning community began) to 1996, when the staff felt TNC and their collaborative work were fully flourishing. In 1991, the school, as indicated by the state's assessment of basic skills, was ranked in the lowest quartile of schools in the school district. In the spring 1996 tests, the school had moved to the top quartile of the districts' 65 elementary schools.

As noted, the school staff joined together as a professional community of learners, engaging in reflection, assessment, study, and learning about how to make TNC work in their classrooms. The staff at Cottonwood believe they have the capacity to use The New Curriculum and other programs they have adopted in a high-quality way and that students are well served and learn from their delivery of the programs. Since they have a long term commitment to their kids, student learning is the centerpiece of their vision.

The teachers feel that new programs have required their collaboration and coming together to learn as a unit, working their way through new material and processes. Their principal encouraged collective learning, making it clear that expectations were high. Such learning was enabled through arranging time, schedules, and structures to accommodate it.

Again, the principal was active — managing and effectively utilizing resources, monitoring and encouraging efforts. The principal maximized the resources brought by grants, large and small, for the benefit of the students. Further, she gave teachers the freedom and the responsibility for making decisions; she created a climate where this could happen.

As a result of working toward implementation of TNC, faculty shared their ideas and practice. The principal facilitated and encouraged "internal" open house for the faculty where teachers shared successes. Certainly, one element upon which this way of working is built is trust: the principal's trust in the teachers and their reciprocal trust in the principal. But, initially the message that the principal conveyed to the teachers was this: You're hurting, I hear your pain, I care. Clearly, caring, among all of the school organization's constituents — children, teachers, administrators, parents — is what drives this school.

For the Reader's Reflection and Consideration:
Propositions from the Research Study of Cottonwood Creek School

To highlight the research findings from the study of Cottonwood Creek School, the following premises or propositions have been identified:

- In a school where the staff operates as a professional learning community, the aspirations of the teachers, as well as the

needs of the students and goals of the school, are realized.

- There must be some factor or purpose around which the staff rallies its interest and energy to join in community, and that factor must ultimately benefit students.

- In combination, an external force (The New Curriculum) and an internal force (the leadership of the principal) provide the support and guidance for the development of a community of professional learners.

- The factors that make it possible for students to grow and develop (provision of stimulating and relevant material, processing the material in a social context, feedback on performance, support and encouragement, etc.) are the same that enable professional staff to grow and develop.

- A climate of democratic participation (in matters of authority and decision making) by all constituents in the school — administrators, teachers, other staff, students, parents — generates energy and enthusiasm to reach goals.

- In addition to a focus on goals and productivity, the community of professionals in the school demonstrates care and concern about the students and each other.

- Organizational learning, in contrast to individual learning, is richer and provides focus for the members of the professional learning community.

- The school's administration must provide the schedules and structures for initiating and maintaining organizational learning and its application by the professionals in the school.

- Sharing their classroom practice provides the opportunity for members to give and receive feedback, contributing to their learning and development.

- An undeviating focus on students, their needs and care, is the compelling motivator of the learning community of professionals.

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